

## The Tim Smal Show - 16 April 2020 transcript

*Carol Williams, from The Stellar Effect, talks about podcasting and entrepreneurship.*

**Tim Smal (host):** Hi everyone and welcome to the show. My name is Tim Smal and my guest today is creative entrepreneur Carol Williams. She recently opened The Stellar Effect, which is a creative audio agency in Cape Town, with her entrepreneurial partner Jason Skippers. And she has been involved with a lot of different projects over the years, ranging from music therapy, community development, small business development. And we have her on the line today in Cape Town. How you doing Carol?

**Carol Williams (guest):** I'm doing good, thanks. Life in the time of Corona - but yes, I am well, thank you.

**Tim:** Have you been keeping quite busy working from home over the last few weeks?

**Carol:** Definitely. Yeah, I think for me, I've also tried to embrace the opportunity to rest a little bit and to not try and get super busy. Yeah, so it's been a mixture of regular work and hardly any difference, in some ways, to normal life. And then some real changes and I think just taking time out to also think about the next little while and what that could look like for me, both in terms of personal life and business ventures as well.

**Tim:** Great. Well, as a podcaster myself, I'm really excited to have you on the show today. I see you as an authority in South Africa on podcasting, so I'm certainly going to be asking you a lot of questions about the medium. But before we get there, perhaps you could tell the listeners about The Stellar Effect, which is a creative audio agency, and what you guys get up to there.

**Carol:** Sure. So we started in about 2017. Both myself and Jason are musicians and we write music as well. And we'd worked on a small film project together and we thought "OK, this has worked quite well. We've enjoyed working together - why don't we start a music agency or a music production house?" So that was the start of Stellar. And then over time we felt that music... firstly, that's quite a busy space already, and we started exploring other forms of audio content and that kind of thing. And we came across podcasting - this was, yeah, as I say, in 2017 where, I think, obviously around the world it was already quite big, but it wasn't really very well known in South Africa yet - well, in my circles anyway.

And we started exploring this - I remember somewhere near the end of 2017, saying to Jason "Come, let's just try this podcasting thing." We recorded our first series just to try and learn and figure out how to do this thing. And that's really when our - I guess, what our business is now, where it started developing from. We then, at the beginning of 2018, we started working with a business coach and we started developing our ideas, 'cos we had a lot of different ideas. I remember back to those days and we literally had walls full of Post-it notes with all our ideas and we were sure that we could do all of them, all at once. And our business coach was very kind and allowed us to think that for a little while. And eventually we kind of narrowed it down to storytelling and audio storytelling. We had film as part of our offering for a while. We had storytelling workshops as part of our offering for a while.

And then, I want to say, sort of, midway through last year we made the move to purely focus on audio. We found that we were spreading ourselves too thin with having film and a few other things on our offering. We stopped with the film and we stopped with some of the other things that we were doing and we decided to focus purely on audio, mostly in the

form of podcasting. And then also developing audio brands sounds which is, I guess, what people would think of as jingles. I guess there's this developing thing in the world at the moment, which is quite exciting, around the potential of branding in the audio space. So visual branding is something that we are very well acquainted with, but the use of music and sound and audio in that space is, kind of, untapped in a lot of ways. So that's a space that we've ventured into as well.

We have a collaborative business model, we call it 'The Stellar Umbrella', and we work with other small businesses, other creatives that have complimentary services. So for example, we work with scriptwriters, because part of our service offering is the script writing for podcasts. And there we work with writers. We work with graphic designers. There's a whole lot of different people that we end up working with and we can pull them into projects, which is also great 'cos it just broadens the expertise and the creativity available to us and that obviously benefits our clients as well.

**Tim:** Great. So essentially The Stellar Effect is South Africa's first full service podcast production agency. So you guys are doing everything from the strategy development, the script research and writing, the design of the podcast logo, all the technical and creative production, the post-production, and of course, composing the audio brand sound. So this is very exciting because podcasting is a growing medium. The last estimate on your website stated that about 124 million people globally are listening to podcasts and that's growing exponentially every year. So 2020 is gonna be a big year in the podcasting space. What do you think is so exciting about this medium that you connect with – why is it becoming so popular?

**Carol:** So I think for me, I don't really necessarily see it as a new medium. Well, it is new and it's also not - I mean, storytelling is as old as humans. I think just the way we do it has changed. I remember as a little girl listening to storyteller tapes - I don't know if you listened to those? And then I would also record my own stories on my little tape player and there's something magical about listening to a story or hearing a story. If you think about radio, in the heyday of radio, and even the series that were on radio - the stories, the non-fiction stories that were told on radio. And the whole family would be huddled up around the radio and listening to that. And then obviously there was the invention of TV and it, kind of, moved to more visual things.

But I think the reason why podcasting as a medium excites me so much is because there's a lot of creative potential with audio, which I think a lot of people - they can see that when it's visual and audio, but there's something quite wonderful about allowing someone's imagination... it's, kind of, the same as reading: when you read something... I don't know if you've ever had that experience then when you watch the movie and you either love it or hate it, 'cos the character isn't quite how you would have portrayed them or it's not quite how you imagined them to be. And so there's something with audio that still leaves something to the imagination of people.

I think there's also - if I look at the advent of social media, say over the last... about ten years - even when social media started, there was a bit more authenticity there. And I think there's a generation of people now who are finding social media quite fake – OK, I'm generalising here, obviously. But there's this desire for authentic stories and I think the medium of podcasting - it's really hard to fake something that is thirty minutes long or forty minutes long or an hour-long. I think there's a real place of authenticity and authentic voices and stories that come through in podcasts. So those are, I guess, on that level things that really excite me.

In terms of South Africa, the thing that excites me a lot about podcasting, is the fact that it's a lot cheaper data-wise than video. And so if you think about the potential of podcasting in the education space, in the development space - I think it's infinite. You can just think about how many people can access... maybe access information that they wouldn't necessarily have been able to access in the past and for a lot cheaper - for a lot cheaper than YouTube or whatever. So I think in South Africa, particularly, there's an accessibility thing which is quite exciting. And brands being able to access markets that they maybe haven't been able to access in the past and really add value - I think that's a big part of our hearts, anyway, is: We don't ever wanna create content just for the sake of it. We want to make content that really matters and really makes a difference. And there's such a powerful medium in audio in being able to do that.

**Tim:** Yes, podcasting is certainly a very special medium. It creates a way for you to connect with the person behind the scene, behind the show. So not just the podcast host, but their guest and all the material that they have produced. So I have a really good example: Yesterday when I was doing my washing, I took my cell phone, I logged onto Spotify and I started listening to a couple of different podcasts. And I found myself listening to a podcast called 'The Curious Cult' which is by Nic Haralambous, a South African podcaster. And his guest on the show was Mmusi Maimane, the South African politician. And while I was hanging out my washing yesterday, I was listening to Mmusi's voice in my ears. And I learnt so much about him and I really felt like he was there with me while I was hanging out my washing. And I just learnt so much and it was so great to I suppose connect with him in that way, that I just really enjoyed that experience. And I realised that the possibilities are infinite, in terms of connecting with various people around the world. So it's not just in South Africa - you can listen to podcasts from all over the world. But have you had experiences like that, where in that moment, whether you washing dishes or washing clothes or whatever, you've had this experience of connecting with someone through a podcast?

**Carol:** Definitely. I think there's something so powerful in hearing people's stories. Yeah, there are a few podcast that I really enjoy listening to which... it kinda allows me a space into the process that someone has been through. So, for example, there's one that I really like called 'The Second Life' and it's about women entrepreneurs or creatives who have had more than one career. I mean, there's really big names on there like Cindy Crawford and that kind of thing. But I think that there's a generosity in the storytelling, in that if you can listen to someone else's journey of a start-up business or even a songwriter or someone who has been through the process to get where they're at. And I think sometimes we often look at people and we're like "Oh, they just got there" or like "that must have been so easy for them." And we actually don't understand the process of how hard it was or the lessons they learnt along the way. So I think the medium actually really, like you said, affords you that really valuable insight into someone's journey in something. So that's obviously in terms of interview-type podcasts and then there's knowledge-based podcasts and there's, I think, the ones that are just purely entertainment or comedy or whatever. So I think even within that there's just so many opportunities to engage with stories in different ways.

**Tim:** Yeah, I guess there is something for everyone. Whether you listen on Spotify or Google podcasts or Apple podcasts or Podchaser, you can create your own list of podcasts that you like and then keep up-to-date with whatever you want to. But speaking about people's journeys, you yourself have been on quite an interesting journey over the last decade or so, in terms of your work and your life. I mentioned earlier on the show that

you come from a music therapy background. You've done a lot of community development work and you moved into the small business development area. You've certainly become an entrepreneur in your own right. So would you like to tell us a bit about what that journey has been like for you?

**Carol:** Sure. I definitely wouldn't call it a normal... bunny ears that "normal"... journey. I don't know about you or anyone listening to this, but I think the expectation I had, anyway, of life after school was: Go to university, you study and then you work - and then you... that seems to be where it runs out, in terms of what people know. And I think I found myself finishing university - I did a master's in music therapy and then after three years of working in that I was like, "OK and now... I'm kind of bored." And I guess people would say, "Oh, you know, like millennials or whatever..." But for me it was more about a thing of like, I knew that I had more potential, I had more capacity and I didn't quite feel like I was going to meet that - especially 'cos I was working in the NGO sector. And I think for me, also just seeing how necessary it was to create environments where social change... I think, a big vehicle of social change is actually in creating businesses and creating employment and also opportunities for people to get dignity through work. And not necessarily just in a feeding scheme or whatever - although obviously all of those things are super important... super, super important. But for me, I just felt like it wasn't quite where I wanted to be.

Yeah, I then went and worked at an entrepreneurial development academy. I was there up until the end of last year. I was there full-time for two-and-a-half years and then I went part-time to, kind of, figure out what I wanted to build. So that was amazing. I think anyone starting an entrepreneurial journey, having some form of regular income is super important because you don't want to put the pressure on your business too early to pay you like a full salary or whatever. I think a lot of people actually... their ideas don't work out because they put the financial pressure on their start-up or on their venture too soon. So for me, that was quite a key. And I was developing other skills at the same time. I had always performed as a musician and started writing music as well and continue to do that. And then started Stellar.

So I've worked in Pollsmoor prison as a music therapist. I've worked in theatre. I really have had a lot of different experiences. I mean it's been a different journey, I think, to a lot of my friends and even my siblings. I think my poor parents have been... I think they went through a patch of being really worried and now they, sort of, starting to get it. But for me, I just was like "You know, I can't just be satisfied with doing this one thing - I know that there's more and I want to explore all of those things." And I think, for me, it's become more and more refined over time. Like where I'm at now, I would say is ... yeah, it's a lot more refined than where I was a few years ago. But it's been really exciting... and scary a lot of the time, you know, walking away from a full-time job and the security of a salary and all that stuff is never easy. And I would say, "Only do that if you really sure you want to, because the demands of that journey are huge." But I think if you're someone who is creative and you have a lot of different ideas, I think it's really important to allow yourself to explore those things. And something like for us getting a business coach - that was wisdom. Sometimes you don't know what you don't know and thinking that you're gonna be able to figure everything out on your own, I think, is not necessarily the wisest thing. And so obviously there are people along the way that will help you do what you want to do.

Again, this is a personal preference. I know for me, I just can't do one thing - I know that it's always gonna probably look like a few different things at the same time. I think a big part of that was letting go of this idea of "OK, now finally I'm just gonna do one thing." Whereas actually maybe I'll never just do one thing and that's actually OK. And even if I do

just end up doing one thing, that's also fine. It's letting go of certainty and this, sort of, weird control that we try and exert over knowing everything about how our lives are gonna turn out. I don't think anyone knows that really. And obviously you can exercise wisdom in how you go about making those decisions. But for me, it's been really cool to explore and discover all of these things - as a person, obviously that's been an internal journey, but then obviously the expression of that, in terms of business and creative projects and all of that, has also been really cool.

**Tim:** Yeah, it certainly is a journey of exploration. The way I see it, is that it comes down to trial and error. Because when you're younger, you think to yourself "Well, I like doing this or I like doing that - I'd like to be, so and so when I'm older." But in reality, until you try those different jobs and you experience what it's like to be in those job roles, you don't really know. And so when you leave school, as the years go on from college into your first job and so forth - you're really experimenting with what makes you come alive, where you feel competent, etc. And one of the most useful tools for me when I was working for a company was the Clifton Strengthsfinder, where I was able to identify my top five strengths. And that really helped me to identify the areas where my core gifts were. In other words, where I was able to contribute to the team doing work that was of an exceptional quality. And I think that's the journey that everybody is on, because everybody is different and they've all got these different strengths. But they really want to feel like what they doing matters and it matters to other people. And when you doing something well and you enjoy it and other people notice that, you get this real sense of satisfaction. Would you agree with that?

**Carol:** Hundred percent. I love the Clifton Strengthsfinder actually. I remember doing it and almost bursting into tears 'cos suddenly I was like "Oh, this makes so much sense." My top strength is 'ideation' and for me, you just basically think of ideas all the time. And I knew that about myself, but I didn't realise that it was a strength. I didn't realise there was something that I could utilise and it was probably why I got so bored, so quickly once the ideation part of something was done. Yeah, and I I think even within building a business, both my business partner and I have done the Strengthsfinder recently and then looking at how we can structure the business around those things, instead of trying to build something that actually doesn't suit us, in terms of our strengths and that kind of thing.

So, I so agree and I think I often fear keeps people back from really engaging with the life that they want to have. And I think for me, that's also been such a powerful thing to recognise is: I'm not a victim - no one is a victim. Yes, you've been through hard stuff or sometimes you don't necessarily get to choose your situation, but you always get to choose your response. And so for me to sit in work that I wasn't necessarily loving, I realised that I actually had a "victim mentality" there, 'cos I was, sort of, allowing myself to be a victim to the situation, instead of being like "OK, well what kind of life do I want to live and what kind of work do I wanna do?" It takes a lot of humility, I think, to do that 'cos for me I was... Flip, when I made that decision, I was working a full-time job and then working at a coffee shop on the weekend and you know, it's so easy to be like "Oh, well I have a master's degree - why am I serving people coffee?" But actually for me, I was like "If that's part of how I get to where I wanna be, that's fine." And eating 'humble pie' every once in a while is not a bad thing, because, I think, if you know why you doing something, then it doesn't necessarily make waking up on a Saturday morning, super early to go to this job you don't particularly want to do, when all your friends are eating breakfast because they actually have "real jobs" - again, I use that term loosely.

But for me, I realised I needed to have a long-term view of what I was building. I can't just have a short-term view because otherwise I'm always going to feel like I'm failing, you

know. Whereas actually, if I have a view of like twenty years or thirty years or forty years of my life and recognising that what I'm building now will probably, hopefully set me up for better things later on as well, and not kinda just building for the immediate future.

**Tim:** Yeah and I guess what it comes down to for everyone, is that they need to develop a certain amount of self-awareness. So in other words, they need to have a good understanding of who they really are - not what other people want them to be or what their parents think that they should do, because when they really have a good understanding of their personality type, their core gifts, then they're able to make decisions that are in line with where they want to be in the future. And it's going to make them happy. Because ultimately everybody has to work - whether you have one day job, a side hustle, a passion project - whatever you call it... everyone has to generate income and everyone has to work. But if you are engaged with your work, if you enjoying what you doing - you are going to feel more fulfilled. Your happiness levels are going to rise and that's going to impact your whole life, because people spend so much time at work, that their happiness is linked to the way that they feel about their work.

**Carol:** Hundred percent. And I don't get the point of being unhappy for like, forty years and then what... and then you saved and then you - it seems like people in retirement are also kind of unhappy, from what I can tell. *[laughs]* It doesn't really make a lot of sense to me. And I think for our generation, especially, I think retirement is not really, necessarily even going to be something we get to experience. And I think that's kind of cool - I kinda want to be like, 95 years old and still doing gigs, you know what I'm saying? *[laughs]* But maybe I'll feel differently when when I'm that age.

But I think, for me, it's not necessarily just about happiness, but it's about purpose. And I think, generally people want to feel like they have a purpose. And if you feel like you're in your purpose, you going to probably be happy. But I think, it's about knowing what you'd like to build and then it doesn't matter if it's hard to get there - you actually know the direction that you're headed in and so you can, kind of, take the hard stuff with the... 'cos it's not going to be... not everything is going to be easier, you're not going to necessarily feel happy everyday. But I think, overall there's the deep sense of like - I describe it more as like, peace than happiness. So even on really tough days or days where I'm like "What the heck am I doing? Why am I doing this?" I still have a peace that I know means that I'm in the right place. I don't know if they make sense? But yeah, I think people in general are wanting to live in a purposeful way and feel like their life has meaning. I don't think you can have both - I don't think you can live in a way that is just to please other people and have that. I'm not sure that that's possible.

**Tim:** So in line with all these ideas that we're speaking about today, do you have any advice or tips for the listeners out there that might be grappling with some of these issues?

**Carol:** I think it's about letting go of your own perception of what life should look like and having more of a curious outlook. So being like, "I wonder what it would be if it was this? Or I wonder if I did that, what would happen?" For me again, taking the time to find out what really makes you come alive is super important, because it does - it takes time, it takes effort... it's a lot easier to just numb yourself. It's a lot easier to live vicariously through other people. It's a lot easier to compare yourself or to get trapped in comparison and kinda allow that 'victim mentality' to settle. So I think, just being like "Cool, do I wanna choose the hard route or am I happy with just sticking in this space - where I'm maybe not thriving but, you know, I get to pay my bills every month and that's actually enough for me." I think it's just recognising - what do you want? And then making choices according to that.

Yeah and I think the other really important thing is to not try and do stuff on your own. Like I said a bit earlier - you don't know what you don't know. So especially if you're wanting to start a business, for example - get people who know more than you do to help you, to come alongside you. Ask lots of questions, ask people. And I think to just try stuff. And I know that this maybe a bit cheesy, but if you can get into your head that "something isn't a failure - like you've just worked out how not to do something." And instead of linking your self-worth to whether something works or not, which is difficult - I do get that. But then it stops being so scary. Or maybe it doesn't stop being scary, but you'll do it anyway - like you do it, in spite of that thing.

**Tim:** Wow, there's certainly a lot of takeaways there. I particularly enjoyed the comment on collaboration. I always think about working with others and working together on teams and you know, sharing knowledge, sharing experience - coming together to create something wonderful that's bigger than just the individual. So I'm very excited about collaboration and speaking of which - if any of the listeners would like to get hold of you Carol, your website is [thestellareffect.com](http://thestellareffect.com)

**Carol:** That is correct, yes. Or they can email at [hello@thestellareffect.com](mailto:hello@thestellareffect.com) - that will also get to me.

**Tim:** Wonderful. Well, it's been really great speaking with you today Carol. My mind has been going crazy with all these cool ideas that you've been talking about. It's gonna be really fun listening back to the show and reflecting on all the 'pearls of wisdom' that you've dropped today on this podcast, so thank you so much.

**Carol:** Cool. Thanks so much for the opportunity, it's such a pleasure.

**Tim:** Awesome. Take care and all the best for 2020.

**Carol:** Thanks Tim, you too. All the best.